



SUMMER 2005

Debbie Regala

State Senator

27th LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

Olympia Office:

PO Box 40427
Olympia, WA 98504-0427

Phone: (360) 786-7652

E-mail:
Regala.Debbie@leg.wa.gov

Committees & Leadership:

Majority Whip

Vice Chair – Human Services
& Corrections

Ways & Means

Rules

Water, Energy & Environment

Other Appointments:

Legislative Ethics Board

Joint Legislative Audit &
Review Committee, Chair



Dear Neighbors,

It's great to be home. After a long session – and one of the most productive and successful in recent memory – the 2005 Legislature has adjourned for the year. I wanted to take this opportunity to provide you a review of some of the highlights.

At the beginning of the year, lawmakers faced serious challenges. Yet we knew we couldn't delay making critical investments in our schools and universities, in health care for more of our population, in our transportation infrastructure, in a stronger safety net, and in an improved justice system.

We managed to accomplish all this and more, including landmark elections system, government accountability and environmental reforms.

Inside this newsletter, you'll find all the details about the Legislature's efforts this year to make Washington a better place for you, your children and your grandchildren to live, work and raise a family.

As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the issues discussed inside, or any other matter of importance to you. You can contact me by phone, letter or e-mail. I read every message from citizens from the 27th District and make it a priority to respond as quickly as possible.

Thank you for the honor and privilege of serving you in the Legislature.

Sincerely yours,

Debbie Regala
State Senator



TOP STORIES

Elections Reform

The 2004 election exposed unacceptable flaws in our state elections system and made election reform a top priority in the 2005 legislative session. The Legislature passed a major elections bill that protects the rights of law-abiding voters and restores trust in our election system.

Senate Bill 5499 includes the following provisions:

- All poll-site voters will have to show a photo ID, voter registration card, utility bill or government document to establish their identity and residence. The secretary of state will establish rules governing what documents are acceptable.
- New statewide signature verification standards for absentee ballots will be developed by the secretary of state in consultation with law enforcement.
- A voter database, available by January 2006, will provide county auditors with a central list of eligible voters. The list will be consistently updated with the names of deceased persons and convicted felons.
- The certification period will be lengthened to 21 days, allowing more time for the return of military ballots.
- Ballots will no longer be "enhanced" when machines cannot read them, but a duplicate ballot would be created so the ballots can be counted. An audit trail will link the duplicated ballot to the original, unchanged ballot.
- At certification, county auditors will have to immediately reconcile all votes cast with the number of voters credited. Results of recounts will not be reported until all counties have completed their work.
- Voting twice or destroying voter registrations will be felony offenses.



Other election reform legislation approved this session includes:

Senate Bill 5743 scrubs the voter rolls to ensure that felons, the deceased and non-citizens are not voting in our elections.

Senate Bill 5395 requires electronic voting machines to have a voter-verifiable paper trail.

Senate Bill 5565 requires the secretary of state to send information to alert our service men and women that:

- return postage on military ballots is free;
- the date written by the voter on the return envelope is considered the date of mailing;
- the envelope must be signed by election day; military voters do not need to pre-register;
- faxed ballots are allowed; and
- e-mailed ballots are available.

Government Accountability

Responding to taxpayers' calls for more efficient and responsive state government, the Legislature approved comprehensive reviews of all government activities.

House Bill 1064:

- requires independent performance reviews of all state agencies,
- guarantees citizen input by establishing a Citizen Advisory Board,
- develops an audit schedule in order to identify weak areas and improve efficiency.

This legislation is in addition to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) which I chair. JLARC conducts performance audits, program evaluations, and other policy studies through non-partisan staff and contracted auditors. The results of these audits are available at: www.jlarc.leg.wa.gov.

KEY BUDGET ISSUES

Health and long-term care

This session, the Legislature reversed harmful policy decisions made in 2002 and 2003, and provided significant funding to increase access to health care services.

More specifically, the Legislature:

- Maintained current Medicaid eligibility and standards;
- Maintained the Basic Health Plan at 100,000 enrollees;
- Maintained funding for community clinics;
- Eliminated children's health care premiums, ensuring that 4,200 more children will continue to be covered;
- Eliminated administrative hassles that caused about 25,000 children to lose coverage;
- Began the full phase-out of the previously imposed nursing home bed tax (currently at \$6.50 per patient per day, the tax is reduced to \$4.50 then \$3 then \$1.50 to \$0 over the course of the next two biennia);
- Increased funding for higher wages for individual providers and agency workers caring for the elderly and disabled;
- Increased funding for those who contract with the state to provide health and human services, such as:
 - foster care families,
 - child care agencies,
 - nursing homes,
 - hospitals, physicians, dentists, pharmacists, and mental health treatment providers who serve people of Medicare and Medicaid, and
 - community residential care facilities.



The Legislature also passed important legislation to:

- Expand the state's existing prescription drug program by allowing uninsured Washingtonians, as well as private businesses and labor unions, to join the program, making them eligible for a discount on prescription drugs.

Mental health

With the state's loss of \$82 million in federal Medicaid funding, 2005 was shaping up to be among the worst years for Washington's mental health system in a long time. However, the Legislature managed to backfill in full these lost federal funds for mental health. The successes didn't stop there. The Legislature also passed historic legislation to:

- Achieve mental health parity in health insurance plans

We know that those who suffer severe, persistent and chronic mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia can be treated and can be helped. (next page)

Education

The budget approved by the Legislature recognizes the need to improve our schools so that every child – rich or poor, living in urban or rural areas – gets the best education in the world, no matter where they are on the education continuum.



The Final Budget:

K-12

- Fully funds 2003's voter-approved Initiative 728 (class size) and Initiative 732 (teacher COLAs), which have gone unfunded for the past two years;
- Expands Learning Assistance program designed to help struggling students and bases eligibility on poverty levels;
- Expands early learning programs;

Higher-Education

- Expands access to baccalaureate degree programs;
- Adds nearly 8,000 new enrollments in higher education;



- Boosts the number of students eligible for a State Need Grant (a family of four with an income of \$43,000 may now qualify);
- Allows the University of Washington-Tacoma to offer some 4 year degree programs beginning in fall of 2006 – while still maintaining its primary mission of offering upper division classes and access for transfers from our community colleges.



(continued from previous page)

And the cost to businesses of absenteeism, lost productivity, and claims for disability and unemployment insurance for those currently without care is greater than the cost of providing them the care they need.

Thirty eight states have passed comprehensive mental health parity laws without breaking the back of the insurance system. Senate Bill 5450 will do the same for Washington.

- *Integrate mental health and substance abuse treatment*

We also know that three percent of our population is mentally ill, yet 35 percent of our jail and prison population is mentally ill.

Providing correct and consistent treatment for those suffering from mental illness will cut down the flow of victims and of inmates into our correctional system, and ease budget pressures.

The Legislature passed **Senate Bill 5763** to:

- *dramatically expand treatment for mental health and chemical dependency,*
- *establish an integrated treatment system for co-occurring chemical dependency and mental health disorders,*
- *place the focus of treatment services on recovery rather than maintenance,*

- *help those on Medicare stay on Medicare and receive the treatment they need, and*
- *promote family therapeutic courts helping to keep families together.*

Prevention of child abuse

I am also proud to have prime sponsored and passed two bills this session which will further efforts to prevent child abuse in our state:

- **House Bill 1097** creates the 'Keep Kids Safe' specialty license plate, the proceeds from which will benefit programs of the Washington Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.
- **Senate Bill 5898** appropriates \$25,000 for the Council to develop an outreach campaign regarding Post Partum Depression. Unfortunately, when Post Partum Depression is untreated, children can become victims of neglect or abuse. Luckily, proper diagnosis and treatment can prevent such tragedies.

Reinstating the estate tax

Washington's tax system is the most regressive tax system in the nation. We're among a handful of states that have no income tax, either personal or corporate or both.

People in the lowest income brackets pay about 18 percent of their income in taxes. People in the highest income brackets pay about 4 percent. This means that, relative to their incomes, Washington's lower and middle income taxpayers pay more than the wealthiest among us.

The estate tax has always been a more progressive source of revenue. Washington lost its estate tax in February via a Supreme Court decision.

Senate Bill 6096 partially reinstates the estate tax to apply initially to estates of \$1.5 million and up; in 2006, the threshold will rise to \$2 million. Previously, the threshold was \$900,000. The reinstated tax dedicates the revenue from the tax to the new Education Legacy Trust Fund, an account designed to pay for the smaller class sizes required by 2003's unfunded voter-approved Initiative 728, as well as higher education enrollments, financial aid and other education needs.

The Department of Revenue estimates that only 250 of the wealthiest taxpayers per year will be subject to the estate tax, yet it will benefit Washington's one million school-age children.

Criminal justice and corrections

State funding of civil justice in Washington has lagged behind in recent years, putting the responsibility of funding trial courts almost entirely on the backs of local jurisdictions.

Senate Bill 5454 will increase court filing fees and create a dedicated revenue source to meet the state's obligation to fund

- indigent civil defense,
- indigent legal services, and
- improvements to staffing, programs, facilities and services of trial courts.

This will help improve cities' and counties' ability to fund other local programs, and help remove existing roadblocks for people seeking justice.



- A portion of the state's inmate work program that allowed for profit companies to operate inside the walls of some of our prisons was invalidated by the state Supreme Court last May because of a technical conflict with the law that authorized it.

The inmate work program is too valuable to lose. Idleness creates security concerns in our correctional facilities. Deductions from the wages

of inmates in the work programs go toward the cost of incarceration, child support, victims' restitution and to pay court-ordered financial obligations. Since the Supreme Court ruling, nearly \$1 million has been lost for these purposes.

Senate Bill 5631, which I prime sponsored, expands a portion of the work program not invalidated by the Supreme Court. This will permit more inmates to be engaged in meaningful work experiences, while providing long-term benefits to our state. For every dollar invested in Correctional Industries, the state gets a benefit of \$6.65.

Transportation

Improvement Package

The Legislature's 16-year transportation spending plan funds more than 300 highway, bridge and intersection improvements in every county in the state.

The plan includes major contributions for the largest public safety and traffic relief projects in central Puget Sound: \$2 billion for the unstable Alaskan Way Viaduct, \$500 million for the 520 bridge and \$992 million for Interstate 405. It also includes \$771 million for Interstate 5, state Route 167 and other projects in Pierce County.

The package provides significant funds for Pierce County HOV lanes on I-5 and state Route 16, and pays for a number of other projects to help move goods in and out of our Port.

The plan also includes \$51 million a year for freight rail, passenger rail, bus service, park and ride lots, and other proven strategies that take vehicles off the road.



The projects are financed through a 9.5 cent increase in the gas tax phased in over the next four years and small annual weight fees on passenger vehicles. The gas tax will increase 3 cents in July 2005, 3 cents in July 2006, 2 cents in July 2007, and 1.5 cents in July 2008

Clean Cars

More than 50 percent of the air pollution in our state can be linked to automobile emissions. This pollution can lead to respiratory illnesses, including asthma and even cancer.

House Bill 1397 adopts strict car emissions standards this year to improve public health, reduce our dependence on foreign oil and to give consumers more options when they purchase vehicles.

More than 600 vehicles using new, "clean car" technology – including cars, trucks and sport utility vehicles – are available in the eight states that have adopted the "California standards" for vehicle emissions. HB 1397 makes Washington the ninth state to join this growing list.

Capital projects

The capital budget funds appropriations for construction projects, and much of it is financed through the sale of general obligation bonds. Projects funded in the budget enhance communities and create jobs in every corner of the state.

There are numerous competitive funding programs in the capital budget to improve the state's infrastructure, public safety, environment, K-12 and higher education opportunities, and social and cultural resources

Several Tacoma projects were successful in securing funding through these programs, including the Broadway Center for the Performing Arts and the Chinese Reconciliation Park.

The Capital budget also provided funding for:

- *the Puget Sound Freight Building on the Thea Foss Waterway, which is home to the Working Waterfront Museum;*
- *enhanced moorage on the Thea Foss, which will greatly benefit the Tall Ships event; and*
- *the LeMay Car Museum.*



Green buildings

Green buildings are constructed using standards that emphasize fresh air, natural light, low toxins and clean storm water. They provide a healthier environment for students and employees, and reduce public spending through lower energy bills.

Senate Bill 5509 applies to all public buildings that receive state funding and promotes the use of Washington-grown lumber and the most-modern construction techniques.

New revenue

As I discussed in a newsletter I sent earlier this year, I believe we can't continue just to make cuts and expect to have a healthy citizenry, a vibrant economy and great schools. If we don't start making an investment, we can't expect Washington and its citizens to get much of a return.

The budget passed by the Legislature does include some cuts. It also includes a modest revenue package consisting of a reinstated estate tax, and an increase in the per pack cigarette tax and the per liter liquor tax – most of which will go toward funding education.

The amount of taxes raised for the budget is less than the amount lost to court decisions earlier this year, including the \$500 million lost when the Supreme Court invalidated the estate tax. The budget contains no general tax increases, and maintains a healthy reserve of about \$200 million.

I am pleased that the budget passed by the Legislature instills all of the values you helped me identify at the beginning of the year as critical to making Washington the best state in the country – with strong schools, a healthy economy and the quality of life for which our state is renowned.